Balanced Literacy in Seattle Public Schools

Introduction

The goal for literacy instruction in Seattle Public Schools is to ensure that all pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade students become proficient and critical readers and writers, motivated to read and write throughout their lives.

To achieve this goal, the literacy program within Seattle Public Schools is based on a comprehensive, balanced approach, in which reading and writing are regarded as complementary processes that promote higher level thinking skills. Balanced Literacy is based on extensive research in best practices in reading and writing instruction.

As part of the Balanced Literacy program, many of our schools are implementing a workshop approach to reading and writing that is grounded in research from Columbia University's Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. A workshop approach follows the premise that to grow as a reader and writer, a student needs to be spending as much time as possible reading and writing. Daily lessons taught by the teacher focus on strategies that advance this progress.

You may find your child's experience in reading and writing classes (Language Arts at the middle school) different than your experience in school. The greatest differences will be in the length of the lesson presented by the teacher, the amount of choice in independent reading selection, and the amount of reading and writing that is expected from students. Another difference will be in the feedback your child receives, which comes through conferences with the teacher and through an assessment tool called a rubric. The feedback is given frequently and in the case of writing, will be prior to a piece of work being submitted for a final grade.

Frequently Asked Questions

What follows are some common questions that parents have regarding reading and writing instruction. Should you have further questions, do not hesitate to contact Kathleen Vasquez, Literacy Program Manager (kavasquez@seattleschools.org)
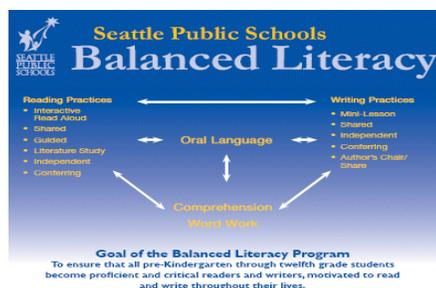
What is a balanced literacy program?

Balanced Literacy is a complete approach to reading, writing, and spelling/vocabulary. A Balanced Literacy program includes the most important parts to reading instruction; phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Seattle Public Schools' reading

program includes researched-based practices of read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading.

The writing process includes gathering ideas, planning, drafting, editing, and publishing writing pieces. At various times, students will be involved in shared writing, interactive writing, and independent writing. In order to expand the students ability to work effectively with words, we incorporate word study practices that include a developmental approach to learning about how words are made up, the various meanings of words, and, in later grades, word origins.

Where can I find the grade level standards for language arts?

The Washington State Office of Public Instruction determines the Grade Level Standards. Click here to find out about the expectations at a particular grade level.   Our literacy programs correlate with the state standards and will match the newly released National Core Curricular Standards before implementation is required. To find out more about the National Core Curricluar Standards click here.

What is Writing Workshop?

Writing Workshop has three basic structures:

- the mini-lesson
- independent writing time when the teacher is conferring and/or working with small groups, and
- share-sessions at the end of the writing time.

These structures support best practices in writing instruction by providing direct instruction, exposing students to examples of quality writing, guided practice as students begin trying their hand at the new learning, and finally independent use of the strategies by the student (Vygotsky, 1978).

 The foundation of Writers Workshop is based on the understanding that writing is a life-long process during which we continually lift the level of our writing skills and outgrow ourselves as writers. Students learn that all writing has essential traits to which they must attend when developing a piece (Spandel, 2001). Writers learn multiple ways to find topics they wish to write about, they learn to make very purposeful decisions about the structure and organization of a piece, they learn a repertoire of methods for elaborating (using description to enhance their writing), they learn to craft their pieces of writing by using literary language and devices, and they learn to employ the conventions of written language (Anderson, 2005; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1989;Graves, 1994; Wood Ray, 1999).

Just as professional writers have a process for developing their work, young apprentice writers also benefit from a clear process through which to develop their writing. (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1981; Fletcher, 1993; Graves, 1994; Murray, 1984)

Each unit in the *Units of Study for Writing* begins with generating ideas for writing. When writers have collected a number of possibilities, they learn ways to choose one idea and begin developing and rehearsing that idea to prepare for the specific genre in which they will be writing. They learn how to draft using the structure and elaboration techniques that apply to that genre. Writers then learn ways to revise their writing using structure, elaboration, and literary craft moves to further reveal their meaning. Next, writers learn to edit their pieces by employing the conventions of written language. Finally, writers publish their work to share with a community – either their class, their school community, or a community outside their school. Research shows that using a writing process for instruction in the complex task of writing, increases student achievement (Hillocks, 1986; Holdzkom, Reed, Porter, & Rubin, 1982; Keech & Thomas, 1979).

(Excerpt from Calkins, Lucy (2006) *Units of Study, Grades 3-5.* Heinemann. Portsmouth, NH.)

How is grammar instruction addressed in WW?

Students are taught that writers make decisions about grammar (structural rules of sentences, phrases, and words) to more clearly communicate to the reader. Instruction occurs in whole-group, in small strategy groups, and in individual conferences. Teachers make decisions about which conventions to address based on the grade level standards and what each student is approximating. Our instruction is designed to arm each writer with the grammar skills they need to develop as a writer.

Grammar instruction is most effective in the context of reading and writing. While teachers use appropriate grammar vocabulary to describe conventions, students are assessed in the appropriate use of conventions.

How do students receive individual feedback on their writing?

Writers Workshop provides teachers and students with a model of instruction in which students receive feedback throughout the writing process. Frequent conferences provide teachers with the ability to address ideas, craft, and structure. Therefore, the instruction and feedback are personalized based on what the teacher sees as immediate needs. In conferences with students, the teacher researches what the writer is practicing, compliments a specific writing strategy they see the student using, and then he/she teaches a new strategy the student can use to further improve their writing. Feedback also occurs in the area of stamina, as well as ideas, craft and structure, in the student's Writers Notebook. This feedback may occur in a conference or in written form.

This real time feedback is beneficial because it allows students to see how well they are doing on their writing as they work through a particular piece. This is very different from the past when students worked on a writing assignment, handed it in, and then received feedback on their finished piece. Drafts and On-Demand Writing are assessed with a rubric, a tool that outlines for students what should be included in the piece of writing.

The various forms of assessment listed above provide feedback to the student and allow the teacher to design instruction for individuals, small groups, and the whole class. Instruction in a

workshop classroom, therefore, is timely, individualized, and empowers all students to better reach grade level standards.

What is Reading Workshop?

Reading Workshop is an approach to reading instruction that provides students with explicit lessons by the teacher and extended time to read and practice the skills and strategies learned in the lessons. Students get better as readers when they have time to read in books they choose and which they can read with a high degree of ease. Such books are sometimes referred to as ***just right books***. Students read from a variety of genres in books that are of high interest.

Reading Workshop is one system of reading instruction in a Balanced Literacy program. Read aloud with student discussion, word work, and shared reading are other integral pieces that occur in conjunction with the Reading Workshop. The methods of Reading Workshop include mini-lessons, individual conferences, small group instruction, independent reading, and peer partnership discussions. Book clubs, which are very similar to adult book clubs, are present in the middle grades. Through these methods, instruction occurs in the areas of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Our goal is for students to become proficient and critical readers who gain a lifelong love of reading. As students become more experienced readers, the focus of instruction shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.

How are books selected?

One of the cornerstones of reading workshop is that students are reading with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension at their independent *'just right'* level most of the time. Research shows that readers who read books with 96% or greater accuracy make the most gain in reading achievement. They begin to see themselves as readers and then they become more motivated to read. Books at a slightly higher level of complexity are used for instruction. The teacher models reading skills and strategies from higher level books and in doing so helps students develop and deepen their comprehension.

Outside of shared instruction, students have choice in selecting their own text at their *just right* level. Texts used for instruction are selected by the classroom teacher as they meet the different needs and interests of the students.

How can I help my child select books?

For book recommendations and book levels, students and parents can visit their school library, their classroom teacher, or www.scholastic.com. This website has a Book Wizard resource that, when the "guided reading level" is "set", will give levels for many books. It will also offer suggestions when you enter a favorite book. Parents can also access titles of books at a variety of levels on the Seattle Public Schools literacy website.

When the level of a book is not available, students are taught to read the first 100 words and check to make sure there are fewer than five words they don't know. This method is often called the *'Five Finger Rule'*. Parents can advance this process by asking questions about what was just read to check if their child is comprehending what they read. Remember, a Just Right book is at a level where students can retell, can infer, can read fluently, can decode 96% of the words,

is interesting to the student, and is student selected. Books that do not meet these criteria could be read just for fun, be read with parent support, or be read aloud to the child. **We encourage you to support your child's reading development by helping them get access to many 'just right' books.**

How do upper grade students learn to discuss literary elements and write literary essays?

Mary Ehrenworth, staff developer at Columbia Teachers College, uses the phrase "plot junkies" to explain those students who read to find out the plot of the text without doing the higher level synthesis necessary of rich literature. A book that is at each student's independent reading level is essential for this work. How then, do we teach reading strategies such as identifying themes, evaluating the impact of literary elements, and the use of literary devices?

Reading strategies to do this work are modeled by teachers using shared texts that may be at a higher reading level than what students are reading. These texts are accessible to all students because the teacher supports their reading. The student is then able to use the strategies learned during the shared reading when they read their own independent book. Students learn to generate and revise theories about characters, change, and other literary elements. These theories become the basis of jotting, partner talk, book club discussions, and literary essay. This work is extended once students are reading higher level books to include over-arching themes. Students are asked to discuss and write about connections and themes across multiple books. The literary essay, introduced just before or during middle school, is the culmination of this work.

What is Word Work?

Word Work is one of the pillars of a Balanced Literacy program. Phonemic awareness and phonics programs are used to provide students with the foundational skills and strategies sequentially taught through a research-based curriculum. The spelling skills taught follow a developmental sequence of patterns, ranging from letter sounds learned by emergent readers to Latin roots learned by more proficient readers. Accuracy increases as skills develop. Vocabulary development is integrated in reading, writing, math, science, the arts, and social studies, with a focus on patterns, relationships, and access to academic language.

Please continue to be involved in your child's education by asking them about the reading and writing instruction they are receiving at school. Working together we can reach the goal of every student a proficient and critical reader and writer.